

## Why They Choose: Understanding the Instrument Selection Choices of My Own Elementary School String Students

By

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### Abstract

*The choice to study an instrument is an important decision for a child and family. Research shows that children select instruments because of preferences for sound, to be in community with friends, because of family influences, physical factors, perceived ease, timbre, and gender influences. This study investigated selected instrument choices of my own 3<sup>rd</sup> grade string students. Children and their parents completed a questionnaire, and this constituted the primary source of data. Open-ended response provided further insight into how children arrived at their instrument selection. Results indicated that string students considered the sound of the instrument most important when choosing, though social influences such as family and gender were also at play.*

**Keywords:** Instrument choice, factors of choosing, string instrument selection, recruitment, instrumental music motivation

## Introduction

Selecting an instrument is often an exciting moment in one's life. In many public schools within the United States, children are offered the opportunity to do in elementary school somewhere around grades three, four, five, or six. It is recognized that fitting an instrument to a child, and vice versa, to appropriately match their interest and personality is an important step in securing their continued pursuit of instrumental study (McPherson, 2001).

The benefit of a good match of child and instrument is seemingly obvious, since they gain access to instrumental lessons, ensembles, and exploration. In turn, the music program benefits through sustained interest in the selected instrument—an important factor in considering the need for suitable numbers and instrumentation within ensembles. While programs have sustained themselves through varied success of instrument selection, research conducted over the course of several decades has revealed several factors that explain why children might select their instrument for study. These include preferences for sound (Boyle, DeCarbo, & Fournety, 1993; Delzell & Leppla, 1992; O'Neil & Boulton, 1996); desire to be in community with friends (MacKenzie, 1992; McPherson, 2001); family influences (Sloboda, Davidson, Howe, & Moore, 1994); physical factors (Kohut, 1985); perceived ease (McPherson, 2001; McPherson & Davidson, 2002); and gender associations (Abeles & Porter, 1978; Abeles, 2009; Delzell & Leppla, 1992).

As the instrumental music teacher at the elementary level, I am involved in coordinating events for children in second grade to prepare them for instrumental study. These recruitment activities included bringing amateur and professional adult musicians and student musicians to perform for them at school assemblies. This same event also included a fun introduction to the instruments, including how they are made and how they make a basic sound. Other recruitment

events included teacher visits to classrooms and official registration forms sent to families that ask for children's top three choices of instrument. Then, in the third grade, they choose an instrument.

The purpose of this article is to document how 28 third grade children at my school ranked and described how they chose which instrument to play. I include an overview of existing literature on instrument selection, including motivation, gender, and family. From these studies, I constructed a questionnaire for students and their families to complete. This constituted the primary source of data.

### **Factors of Choice: Physicality, Family Influences, and Perceived Ease**

In his book on learning theory and music pedagogy, Kohut (1985) suggested that the size and weight of each instrument was an important factor when teaching young children. Further Kohut hypothesized that sometimes music teachers did not understand the importance of the physiological development of children, and these factors may have explained how youngsters came to choose musical instruments for study. For example, an instrument that was not the right physical fit, such as a trombone for a smaller child, might impede initial success. Rather, starting on a small instrument, perhaps a trumpet, and moving later to trombone may be more prudent. This seems common practice in many instrumental music programs today, though more research may be necessary to problematize how these decisions impact the educational experiences and success of children.

Other scholars have investigated various motivational factors that impact the selection process. MacKenzie (1991) studied this issue and McPherson (2000) confirmed it as part of a three year longitudinal study on children's motivation to learn music through playing instruments. For that research, McPherson used open-ended protocols to interview children and

parents, to assess the children's motivation for studying a musical instrument. Using follow up interviews, McPherson applied narrative comments to collect data on practice time, motivation to start study on an instrument family role models and influences, interest in participating in music with friends in a social group, the instrument's natural sound, and the influence of television and movies. McPherson sorted the data coding it into categories of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. External motivators were related to family, friends and social influences, while intrinsic motivators were connected to love for music. A second study by McPherson (2001) one year later, produced the same results.

In 2002, with Davidson, McPherson studied 157 b instrumentalists ages 7 to 9 within their first year of study to gauge their practice habits at home. They collected data children and their mothers, and results indicated that the parental involvement in practice declined within the first nine months of study, as did quantity of practice. Interestingly, the researchers found that at the start of their instrumental study children resolved to practice far more than they actually did. Though this study does consider instrument selection, it does suggest that the difficulty of an instrument, and the commitment to practicing may influence a child's desire to continue study and progress.

Other researchers (Boyle et al., 1993; Delzell & Leppla, 1992; O'Neill & Boulton, 1996) found that children in their middle years considered sound and tone quality as part of their natural musical preferences. Sloboda et al., (1996) suggested that social factors outside of friendship circles, such as familial influence from parents, siblings, and other relatives, may also play a role in instrument selection.

### **Gender Associations**

Research relating to sex and gender-stereotypes that influence which instruments children play, dates to four studies conducted and reported by Abeles and Porter in 1978. They asked parents ( $n = 149$ ) to choose one of eight instruments as their top choice for their son or daughter (Study 1) to learn to play. Findings revealed that most parents selected feminine instruments such as clarinet, flute, and violin for their daughters, and masculine instruments including drums, trumpet, and trombone for their sons. The two instruments that parents considered appropriate for either gender were cello and saxophone.

For Study 2, Abeles and Porter distributed a Musical Instrument Paired-Comparison Survey Form (MIPCSF) to show how instruments, when paired, would rank against each other as masculine or feminine. The survey consisted of the eight different instruments from Study 1 in different pairings ( $n = 26$ ). Pairing each of these instruments against each other, each participant was to select which of the two was most masculine (i.e., flute/drums). Presentation of each pair was randomly ordered. The sample of fifty-eight was divided into two groups, consisting of a Musicians group of music majors ( $n = 32$ ) and a Non-Musicians group consisting of non-majors ( $n = 28$ ). Results from this study revealed a continuum of gender associations, listing the instruments in the following order of masculine to feminine: drums, trombone, trumpet, saxophone, cello, clarinet, violin, and flute. In study 3, Abeles and Porter explored the ages at which sex-stereotyping began and researched possible causes for sex-stereotyping in society in Study 4.

Shortly after the publication of this research, Griswold and Chrobak (1981) found similar results. Using an expanded list of seventeen instruments, undergraduates ( $n = 89$ ) were surveyed. Results revealed that musicians ranked clarinet and double bass as more masculine

over non-musicians. Moreover, two interesting areas were added: instrumental conductor and choral conductor, the former considered masculine, and the latter feminine.

In 1992, Delzell and Leppla continued and confirmed the research of Abeles and Porter in a two-part study. Part 1 of this work replicated the work of Abeles and Porter, studying music majors ( $n = 68$ ) and non-music majors ( $n = 154$ ) as subjects. The music majors were all enrolled in the same music history course, and those not in the major were enrolled in the same introductory music class. To be consistent with the original research, they used the MIPCSF survey form. Their study yielded a Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient of .98 as compared to the Abeles and Porter study, which reported a coefficient of 1.00. Whereas Abeles and Porter reported that the violin and clarinet were more feminine, this study showed the reverse.

Following the procedures described by Edwards (1957), and as with the Abeles and Porter study, Delzell and Leppla (1992) calculated the normalized scale scores. Whereas the range between scores for the Abeles and Porter study was 4.195, Delzell's and Leppla's research demonstrated a range of 2.969, suggesting that the degree of gender associations had decreased since 1978.

In the second portion of this study, the researchers analyzed the preferences for instruments among selectors along with reasons for preferring instruments over others. In an open-response survey, student reasons to select an instrument included: "It's awesome or I like it"; "I like the sound of the instrument"; "It would be fun to play"; "I have a friend who plays it." Reasons to not select an instrument included: "Instrument is too difficult or not fun"; "I don't like it"; "Instrument is too big or weighs too much"; "Instrument is boring." This research also showed that the drums were the most popular choice for boys, as could be expected based on

gender associations. However, it showed that the second most preferred instrument for the girls also included drums. Likewise, flute was the fourth most preferred instrument for boys.

In additional work conducted by Fortney, Boyle, and DeCarbo (1993), researchers took a sample of 990, consisting of band students at the beginning and intermediate levels of playing. Students were in grades six through nine and were attending middle school music programs. The study sampled from thirteen schools across Dade County, Florida. Here, the researchers used a survey to gather data about instrument selection, preference, and influence in choosing instruments. The survey was a one-page instrument consisting of eleven questions, some open-response and others closed-response.

The study highlights the continued gender associations described in Abeles and Porter (1979), showing that boys preferred percussion, trumpet, and low brass and that girls preferred the flute and clarinet. However, the study also suggests an increase in the popularity of the saxophone between both genders from the Abeles and Porter research. Other factors influencing their selection tended to be people-oriented choices, such as influence of a middle school music teacher, parents, and friends. Students were greatly influenced by the sound of the instruments, which corroborates some assertions that timbre preferences are important in instrument selection (Gordon, 1991).

Kuhlman (2004), studied relationships between gender, timbre, and instrument choice in 232 fourth grade students. This research uncovered tension between timbre preferences and the actual selection of instruments, showing that boys and girls tended to conform to gender stereotypes in their selection even though their timbre preferences did not match their choices. In 2005, Sinsabaugh, interviewed twelve students between the ages of eleven and sixteen to identify the characteristics of students who cross over gender boundaries. That is, the study

suggested that students resisted choosing instruments to study that were perceived to be contrary to masculine and feminine binaries. That study showed that boys struggled more in crossing and revealed the importance of a strong family network and support in this endeavor. Approval from parents and teachers was important in supporting their decisions to cross over gender boundaries.

Research on this topic has been scant in the last ten years, and reasons for that are still to be explored and beyond the scope of this article. In the last decade, Eros (2008) reviewed the literature to show how our field has addressed this issue through research and practice. But the most recent literature in his study was 2005. Abeles' (2009) study examined how these associations may have changed over the course of three decades from studies conducted in 1978, 1993, and 2007, showing little difference in sex-by-instrument distribution. However; evidence from these studies suggest that girls playing in band may be more likely to cross over gender boundaries than boys in band.

### **Methodology**

The overarching question that guided this study was inspired by my own experiences as an instrumental elementary teacher. I asked, how do my own students rank and describe their selected choice of instrument, and do these choices confirm previously reviewed studies?

To explore this question, I chose to focus on my third-grade string classes in the 2015-2016 school year, totaling 28 students. While students prepare for instrumental music in the second grade as previously described, they make a formal choice to participate in instrumental music in third grade. Like Abeles and Porter (1978), I designed an e-mail questionnaire using Likert-type and open responses to send it to my students and their families to complete. I asked children to rate statements such as: "I like the sound more than all the other instruments"; "I wanted to be in class with friends taking the same instrument"; "A member of my family encouraged me to take

this specific instrument.” The questionnaire included 10 questions in total. Families could access and complete the survey over a period of 9 days, and I encouraged parents to complete the questionnaire with their child to help jog their memories about selecting their instrument. While it was possible that parents influenced their children’s answers, I took that risk because the children were quite young.

### **Results**

Of the 28 families receiving the questionnaire via e-mail, 18 completed and returned it, yielding a response rate of 64%. I required them to answer all questions except question 10, which asked for any additional information to be given. Questions 8, 9, and 10 were open-ended questions. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically means as the measure of central tendency for questions 1-7.

Children answered questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with Strongly Agree as a value of 1.00 and Strongly Disagree 5.00. Based on the means, the strongest influence on instrument choice was sound ( $M=2.33$ ), and the weakest was influence by someone other than family ( $M=3.89$ ). Next to sound was selection based on encouragement of a family member ( $M=2.33$ ), followed by the instrument seeming easy ( $M=3.33$ ) and hard ( $M=3.44$ ). Being in class with friends followed ( $M=3.56$ ), with students reporting to choose a particular instrument because someone in their family played that instrument ( $M=3.83$ ) as second to last.

Open-ended questions revealed interesting perspectives from students and families. Question 8 addressed gender associations, asking, “Did you choose your instrument because it seemed like a boy’s or a girl’s instrument?” Only one answer confirmed gender associations: “Yes, I thought this was a boy’s instrument because of deep sound and size of instrument.”

Others ignored gender boundaries: “I chose this instrument [probably the bass] because not many girls play this instrument. I am a girl.”

Some answers implied a gender-neutral association. For example:

“I didn’t think the cello was a girl’s or boy’s instrument. I just picked it because it seemed like fun to play the cello.”

“I didn’t think it was a boy’s or girl’s instrument. I just liked the sound.”

“It seemed like an everybody instrument.”

“I don’t think the viola is for a boy or a girl. Anyone can play the viola.”

While explaining their response about gender associations, it was also revealed that sound was most important, which is consistent with the mean score of question 1, and the ranking of factors. Other responses indicated that children selected their instrument because of a perception that it would be fun: “I just picked it because it seemed like fun to play the cello.”

In question 9, I asked if there were other reasons not listed for students selecting their instrument. Students and families reiterated a preference for the sound of their current instrument over others in 8 responses. Other reasons included hearing the instrument in a song, it was the only class left with an opening, live concerts, videos, the name, and the large size.

“[student name] started pretty late so only cello classes were available, but it became her favorite class.”

“I first picked the violin because my mom played it. But I thought of the cello as a bigger and deeper sounding instrument so that’s why I chose the cello for one of my options.”

“I saw a video of a 9-year-old playing a bass.”

“I LOVE the name!”

“I saw someone in a band playing it, and I thought it was cool. I liked that it was big.”

For the final question, I asked for respondents to add other information that was not addressed by a previous question. A child expressed frustration by her size compared to the bass,

“it’s hard because I’m so small.” Others expressed their love for their instrument, “I LOVE THE CELLO,” “I feel excited when I play the cello. My teacher is kinda funny and really nice.”

### **Discussion**

Student and family responses to the questionnaire indicated that the child’s preference for sound was the strongest factor selecting an instrument for study. These results are consistent with the open-ended responses given in Delzel and Leppla’s research (1992). Based on the work of McPherson (2002), these responses may be correlated with a high degree of intrinsic motivation and prolonged success and practice with the instrument. McPherson’s work (2001, 2002) would likewise consider the personal connection of loving the instrument, which students expressed in the open-ended questions, to be a strong intrinsic factor of motivation.

The mean scores showed that students were influenced by their environment when taking an instrument. Perhaps their parents or family members influenced them, or perhaps it was their friends. The narrative comments regarding families corroborated these comments. This was consistent with work performed by Sloboda et al. (1996). Interestingly, students were also influenced by what they saw on TV, and by live music from bands. This warrants more investigation into the impact of the live ensemble as a pedagogical and inspirational recruitment vehicle.

The child that explained that her instrument was hard because she was small might confirm Kohut’s (1985) assertion that an instrument should be properly sized to limit frustration at the start, though coming to any conclusions about this child’s experience from the instrument based on this single answer was not possible. It was also consistent with Delzel and Leppla’s (1992) reasons for dissatisfaction with an instrument.

Open responses from children regarding gender associations indicated that there was little influence or pressure to conform to a gender-specific instrument. This is progress, according to the literature (Abeles & Porter, 1978; Sinsabaugh, 2005).

### **Implications for Music Teachers and Music Education**

Results from this study show that my third grade pupils do indeed weigh various factors when selecting their instrument. Practicing educators might consider appealing to these factors when encouraging students to enroll in instrumental music programs. Offering choices to select instruments may foster important dialogue at home regarding what instrument may best suit the child. In addition, offering exposure to live music events as recruitment tools may increase awareness and excitement about studying an instrument. It might also be helpful for teachers to open dialogue in the general music classroom prior to instrument selection about what it might mean to study a particular instrument.

When considering future directions for this research, issues of gender, sexuality, student personal and identities, and student personal and musical agency are factors that are currently part of the music education research agenda, and are primary concerns of many music education scholars. For example, the questionnaire could have included additional questions, to understand these factors. Gathering basic data about student gender identification would allow for a more thorough understanding of gender associations related to the more current literature.

The LGBTQ++ community has moved to center stage in the educational theatre, including music education, and their positive impact cannot be ignored. Political influences, social justice, and artistic citizenship may also impact the decisions teachers make when choosing music, and their children make when selecting the instruments on which to play.

For now, as an active elementary school strings teacher, it was helpful to learn from the responses of my own students. If one were to consider recruitment, this could be important. Perhaps in addition to live performances, our teachers and students might create a series of podcasts to demonstrate certain instruments, so that students may hear the instrument individually at home and at their leisure. Studying why students choose to continue or discontinue in instrumental music in our district would also be warranted as a continuation of this work. It seems that qualitative inquiry through interviews and focus groups would strengthen my understanding of instrument choice for these beginner students. A critical perspective, perhaps examining how traditions in various cultures might impact their choices in instrument selections, or how students might agree or differ regarding importance of factors such as family influence, would be important as well.

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